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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA

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SUBJECT: NORTH SINAI REACTION TO GAZA CONFLICT

REF: 08 CAIRO 136

Classified By: Minister Counselor for Economic and Political Affairs
William R. Stewart for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) Summary: During a trip to the North Sinai Governorate on January 19-20, we met with local leaders and discussed the recent fighting in Gaza, and its effect on the neighboring communities in Egypt. All the leaders, with whom we met, noted that the local population--which is a mixture of Bedouins, Egyptian-born Palestinians and Nile Valley Egyptians--is angry about Israeli military action and psychologically affected by the conflict. Residents of Egyptian Rafah heard the nightly bombings in Gaza and some buildings in the town were damaged by stray ordnance. Residents of North Sinai are participating in providing humanitarian aid to Gaza. Many Sinai residents are volunteering to unload aircraft and load trucks with medical and food supplies. Additionally, many residents are donating blankets, food, and basic medical supplies for the people of Gaza. The local leaders feel that the conflict led the local population to more readily accept Islamic extremism, and makes peace in the region more elusive. End Summary.

Anger at Israeli Attacks on Gaza

¶2. (C) North Sinai Governor General Mohammed Abd al-Fadil Shousha told us that the local populace has been adversely affected by the war in Gaza. He said "many people in North Sinai have Palestinian roots," and are personally affected by the conflict. Fayez Abu Harb, a top Bedouin representative and a member of the Egyptian Parliament invited us to a Bedouin council meeting in Shaykh Zuwayd. During the meeting, he told us that North Sinai is a "border governorate" and incidents in Gaza "strongly impact" on the Palestinian and Bedouin people in Sinai because they have familial ties to people in Gaza. He stated that families in Egyptian Rafah listened to the nightly bombings on Gaza. Abu Harb said many families had left Rafah temporarily to escape the danger and omnipresent reminders of war. (see septel reporting economic situation in North Sinai).

¶3. (C) In a free flowing discussion during the Bedouin council meeting, many of the tribal shaykhs expressed their anger and disbelief at the brutality of the Gaza conflict. They accused Israel of using "illegal phosphorous weapons," and asserted that these weapons were "provided by the U.S." Some shaykhs said they personally helped victims, burned by the weapons, enter Egypt for medical treatment. Bedouin council members also told us that some buildings in Egyptian Rafah were damaged by the Israel air strikes. Abu Harb told us that despite the anger over the Gaza conflict, he asked the Palestinian population "not to violate Egypt's

sovereignty by illegally crossing the border." He said that unlike the past, the last three weeks passed with "no major violation" (reftel).

Egyptian Efforts to Assist and Contain the Crisis

14. (C) As we entered the room for our meeting with Governor Shousha, he was involved in a conversation with the Red Crescent about the amount of aid going from Egypt into Gaza. He was also trying to ascertain damages to buildings in Egyptian Rafah due to Israeli bombing. Shousha told us that "a lot" of medical supplies passed through El Arish into Gaza. He believes that there are enough medical supplies in Gaza, but said that he understood that food is still in short supply.

15. (C) Shousha told us that El Arish Hospital has been designated as a triage site for Palestinians, wounded in the Gaza conflict. He said that approximately 40 people a day are being brought from Gaza to the hospital in El Arish. (Note: During our time in El Arish, we regularly witnessed convoys of orange ambulances coming from the border area to the El Arish hospital. End Note.) Shousha said most of the wounded from Gaza, after being evaluated in El Arish, are sent on to Cairo and other countries for treatment. He said this is because the Government of Egypt wants to maintain El Arish hospital "as a reserve for large, unexpected inflows of wounded."

16. (C) Ahmed Orabi, President of the North Sinai Red Crescent

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Society, told us that his organization is sending 40-50 trucks of medicine per day into Gaza through Rafah, and another 30 tractor trailers through the al-Auja (Nitzanna) crossing. He stated that the Egyptian Red Crescent sent 100 tons of medical supplies into Gaza. Orabi told us that the Red Crescent was also making preparations to establish temporary "refugee camps" in Egyptian Rafah for the 500-600 Palestinians who crossed the border during the conflict. He said that Egyptians whose homes were destroyed will also temporarily reside in the camps. He asked for U.S. assistance in providing tents and water for this effort. He hoped that "the American image could be helped by providing tents, food and water for those in the camps."

North Sinai Populace Providing Aid to Gaza

17. (C) Governor Shousha told us that the local population responded to the war in Gaza by donating food, blankets and medicine. Orabi stated that this was the first time that he felt the "pulse of the Egyptian people" as a result of events in Gaza. He stated that there were approximately 120 volunteers per day that would come to assist in emptying planes and filling trucks with humanitarian aid supplies. Orabi said that "many of the volunteers are students that come to volunteer after finishing their end of semester exams." (Note: During our 1 1/2 hour meeting at the Red Crescent, we witnessed individuals, students, and families continually arriving with donations of blankets, basic medical supplies, and food for the people of Gaza. End Note.)

Consequences of Gaza Conflict

18. (C) North Sinai Red Crescent Vice President Adel el-Ghaly opined that "Israel lost the war because support for Hamas has grown in the region and in North Sinai." Dr. Muhammad Nasser and Dr. Ali El Kassas, two professors at the local branch of Suez Canal University, echoed this sentiment. They stated that the students traditionally viewed events in Gaza

as part of the greater "Palestinian cause," but now many have begun to see events in terms of "Israel versus HAMAS." Abu Harb told us that the conflict in Gaza "hurt the moderate voices in the area." He said that in addition to widespread sympathy for the victims in Gaza, sympathy for more radical Islamists has grown.

¶9. (C) Abu Harb told us that he hoped the new U.S. administration would be able to resolve the Palestinian/Israel issues. He said that a solution would allow the opening of the Rafah border crossing, and create trade opportunities for people in the North Sinai Governorate and Gaza. He said the North Sinai Governorate was in dire need of economic opportunities (septel), and because of the situation between Gaza and Israel there is currently no legitimate trade across the border.

¶10. (C) Comment: While there was anger at the situation in Gaza, we were welcomed by all the leaders in North Sinai. All expressed a desire to engage with the United States and recognized the U.S. role in resolving problems in the region. With the exception of one angry demonstration on January 9, the focus in North Sinai is on helping their "brothers" in Gaza recover from the recent conflict by providing humanitarian aid. However, we noticed that a number of houses on the main road from Bir el-Abd to Rafah were flying Egyptian and HAMAS flags. A few houses were flying the Fatah flag. We had not witnessed this phenomenon on previous trips to the peninsula. This appears to confirm, at least for the present, some of the local leaders' concerns that the recent conflict led people in North Sinai to increase support for the "HAMAS cause" rather than the "Palestinian cause."

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